

Research Article

An Analysis of the Protagonist's Behavior in *Herzog* from Yi-Fu Tuan's Escapism

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Abstract

The novel *Herzog* by the American writer Saul Bellow has received wide attention since its publication in 1964. It centers around the protagonist Moses Herzog's life after his second divorce, in which he is often in a state of uneasiness, going from place to place to avoid problems, writing unsent letters to express dissatisfaction, seeking comfort from others when in trouble, and losing himself in memories when frustrated. According to the Chinese-American humanistic geographer Yi-Fu Tuan's escapism theory, the behavior is in fact escapism. What Herzog really wants to escape is society, others, and himself, and escaping from place to place or person to person, and creating material world and spiritual world, are the different ways of his escapism. And during the process of escape, with embarrassment, pains, impulse and constant self-introspection, he gradually gains strength, and evolves from negative escapism to positive escapism, temporarily achieving reconciliation with reality. There are many reasons for Herzog's escapism, among which his American Jewish identity, the turmoil of the American society in 1960s, the decline of the intellectuals' status and the rise of feminism at that time all play a key role. Herzog's escapism is actually a product of his time, a process of reconstruction of relationship between male and female, and a seeking-existence journey of an intellectual with different ethnicity in American society, with positive escapism born out of negative one.

Keywords

Herzog, Moses Herzog, Escapism, Behavior, Analysis

1. Introduction

The novel *Herzog* is a masterpiece created by the American literary giant Saul Bellow in 1964. The novel mainly revolves around things that happen before and after the Jewish-American intellectual Moses Herzog's divorce with his second wife, Madeleine, who has an affair with his close friend, Valentine Gersbach. Using Herzog's memories and unsent letters as carriers of stream of consciousness, the writer presents the protagonist's ruminations on many social, historical, and ethical issues, well reflecting the complex social situation of 1960s in the United States, the difficulties faced

by middle-class intellectuals, and their struggle to seek existence.

Studies of this novel have been made from various perspectives, Chen (1999) [1] from the perspective of letter writing techniques, Duan and Shan (2004) [2] parody, Wang (2012) [3] and Liu (2015) [4] identity, Zhao (2017) [5] feminism, Peng (2023) [6] narrative perspective, Du (2024) [7] Jewishness embodied in the protagonist.

When commenting on the works of Saul Bellow, Glenday (1990) [8] points out that "there is in American culture a desire

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to escape into an inauthentic version of reality” is one of the concepts “which bear upon the central aesthetic and ethical tenets of his writing”. This is fully demonstrated in the novel *Herzog*. Herzog’s escape behavior runs through the whole novel. Due to the heavy blow from his second divorce, Herzog is often in a state of uneasiness. He is used to going to another place to escape problems, and seeking comfort from different lovers, friends and relatives when in trouble. He tries to obtain inner peace from cleaning and decorating his country house after his injury to escape outside chaos. He often “returns to the past” by losing himself in memories when frustrated, and writes unsent letters to various people in this world to express dissatisfaction and resentment. Based on this, this paper, guided by the escapism theory of the Chinese American humanistic geographer Yi-Fu Tuan, analyzes what Herzog really wants to escape, how he escapes and why he escapes.

2. Escapism

Escapism is usually considered negative in connotation, indicating that people are so powerless in reality that they want to escape it. But according to Yi-Fu Tuan, “a giant among geographers” [9] “escapism is human, and inescapable” [10]. Therefore, escape is human nature, and people, whether consciously or unconsciously, always attempt to escape from the real world and towards the imagined world. People rest in these fantasies to “temporarily avoid the siege of experience and suspicion” [11]. In the process of escape, if people turn short-term fantasies into imagination and create products that promote progress, then this escape is positive. But if fantasies are persistent and getting further away from the real world, people are trapped in them and unable to extricate themselves, then such escape is negative.

No matter whether it is positive or negative, what people attempt to escape is certain, which is nature, culture, chaos, and the animality of humans themselves. These evasions mainly stem from people’s fear of harsh nature, dissatisfaction with and maladaptation to culture and society, thirst for truth and clarity, and aversion to their own animalistic nature.

In the process of escape, people mainly adopt four main ways: moving from place to place, transforming nature, and creating a material world to meet spiritual demands and creating a spiritual world. Moreover, although escape has a negative side, it is through escape that human material and spiritual culture are developed.

Hence, Tuan’s escapism theory does not regard escapism as a simple act of escaping from the real world, but systematically incorporates the factors of the origin, objects, ways and byproducts of escapism, which is much of help in analyzing the protagonist’s behavior in this novel.

3. Objects of Herzog’s Escape

In *Herzog*, the protagonist rarely has a moment of inner

peace, his words and deeds, thoughts and memories full of the sense of escapism. According to Tuan’s escapism theory, Herzog’s escape objects can be divided into three types: the escape from society, the escape from others and the escape from self.

3.1. The Escape from Society

Tuan [10] points out that “people are well aware that when a person becomes aware of his individual differences, pressure and influence will be exerted on each other between the individual and society.” And under such situation, escapism appears. Herzog’s escapism from society is shown in his dissatisfaction with the American society: its politics, the supremacy of money and practical values. He is not content with the current situation of American education, believing that modern science does not care about human nature, but only recognizes intelligence. As for the status of intellectuals in society, he thinks that “things go on as before with those who think a great deal and effect nothing, and those who think nothing evidently doing all” [12]. He also regards modern character as lacking “the stonelike certitude of archaic man, also deprived of the firm ideas of the seventeenth century, clear, hard theorems” [12].

However, dissatisfaction doesn’t lead to any constructive action. He describes his state as “...a Faustian spirit of discontent and universal reform depends on you. Scolding. In-vective” [12]. This is a state of being a giant of words and a dwarf of action.

Dissatisfied with reality but unable to change it, what Herzog can do is just to escape from it, and that is why Herzog thinks he himself is actually “living amid great ideas and concepts, insufficiently relevant to the present, day-by-day, American conditions” [12].

3.2. The Escape from Others

If Herzog’s dissatisfaction with and escape from the society are mostly unilateral, reflected mainly in a way of stream of consciousness, his escape from others is much more dynamic, involving much interaction with others. In this novel, Herzog’s interpersonal relationship revolves around him and his second ex-wife Madeleine, Valentine Gersbach, her lover, and Ramona, his lover. And the relationship circle extends to Madeleine’s original family, his own extended family, his former lovers and few friends. There are also several lawyers and psychologists for solving problems.

Herzog evades his first ex-wife Daisy and his son Marco. Afraid to face his son due to his second failed marriage, he decides not to go to see Marco on Parents’ Day, and makes an excuse of illness for this. This is a manifestation of his evasion of family responsibilities, which is common in his first marriage. In Daisy’s mother’s words, “First one woman and then another, then another. Where will it end? You can’t abandon a wife, a son for these women – whores” [12].

When in conflict with Madeleine, he is often in a passive position. When quarreling, he even takes her blows on his back submissively hoping that she could change her mind. But in the village, tortured by the renovation of the old house and Madeleine's irrational consumption, Herzog, according to Madeleine, is "always crying for the old home..." [12]. Unaware of Valentine Gersbach's affair with Madeleine, Herzog often turns to him for help when in trouble with Madeleine. After knowing the affair between them, Herzog takes no action at first, just expressing his resentment in his heart and unmailed letters, which can be shown in his letter to Dr. Edvig, "And men come and go in each other's souls. Sometimes they come and go in each other's beds" [12].

He is also evasive when facing his lovers. When Ramona begins to take this relationship seriously, he goes to a friend's house in a vineyard to avoid her. He just takes these lovers as a shelter to seek comfort. This is reflected in the relationship with lover Sono. Sono prepares everything best and most comfortable for him, but Herzog doesn't pay a visit to her when she is suffering from pneumonia. Only when Madeleine is busy with church affairs and doesn't want to see him does he think of going to see her.

In this novel, Herzog mostly escapes from the living ones, because the living ones bring him great responsibility and pressure. Most of the people who he is attached to are the dead, because they can bring him warm memories. This tendency of escape is alleviated in the second half of the novel, because the growth of the next generation arouses his sense of responsibility, which plays a key role in changing from negative escapism to positive and constructive escapism.

3.3. The Escape from Self

Saul Bellow elaborates Herzog's self-escape in terms of mental activity and actual behavior. At the beginning of the novel, Herzog, lying on the sofa in a rented apartment in New York, reflects on himself, thinking that "With his own soul, evasive" [12].

Herzog has been trying to escape from his animality. Herzog is afraid of facing up to his own aging. Tuan points out that one that people want to escape from is the human body itself, or further, "all kinds of defects that the body increasingly shows under the measurement of time span" [10]. Many references in the novel to this are made in the scene of Herzog facing the mirror. At the beginning of the novel, Herzog enters Dr. Emmerich's examination room. He calls himself an old fool, "glancing away from the small mirror, the graying hair, the wrinkles of amusement and bitterness" [12]. Herzog is also afraid of facing the topic of death. The decline of flowers and trees in nature and their own aging always remind Herzog of death. He even hallucinates death and sees himself die.

In addition to the escape of animality, Herzog has been in a loss as to the issue of self-identity. This confusion of "what he is" further leads to Herzog's inability to form a clear understanding of himself, and the obstacles in reality make him

subconsciously escape from the search and verification of true self. This confusion and the passive escape feature the first half of the novel. In the second half of the novel, Herzog draws strength from self-reflection and starts to pursue and establish his own identity, trying to escape from the original fuzzy and decadent self to the self with conscience and morality.

4. Ways of Herzog's Escape

In the novel, Herzog often carries a suitcase going from one place to another. During the journey, he either writes letters or falls into the memories of the past. His ways of escape are concrete in the real world, and abstract in his spiritual world.

4.1. The Escape through Moving from Place to Place

According to Tuan's escapism theory, when people are dissatisfied with their natural, social or political environment, geographical migration is a choice. Reality fetters them, which prompt them to have beautiful illusions and expectations of the places far away, and thus have the idea of escaping from place to place.

Herzog comes and goes between cities, New York, Philadelphia, Chicago, Massachusetts and Europe. The second divorce gives Herzog a heavy blow, and he borrows money from her brother Rilla and goes to Europe for relief. When Ramona expresses her desire to marry him, he flees her and goes to the home of a friend in a vineyard. When he sees the crowded cars on the streets of New York in the taxi to the Central Station, and hears the noise of machines, he thinks that "he had to get out to the seashore where he could breathe" [12]. When he gets injured in a car accident and released on bail by his brother Will, he decides to go to the house in Ludeyville to have a rest. He tells Will that "I'm at an awful disadvantage here-dirty, foolish, just bailed out... Everything will look a lot different in the East, next week" [12].

Herzog's escapism through geospatial movement changes with the development of the plot. At the beginning, Herzog encounters a problem and escape to another place, but later, during the escape, he tries to solve problems, which developed into a constructive escape.

4.2. The Escape Through Moving from Person to Person

Besides escaping from place to place, Herzog also escapes from person to person.

Tuan, when talking about the means of transfer and separation of human beings in order to escape from their own animal nature, believes that one of the means of escape is to "escape from the burden and dilemma caused by connection" [10].

He wants to escape the broken relationship with Madeleine

and turn to the lovers for comfort as in his inner monologue “Dear Wanda, Dear Zinka, Dear Libbie, Dear Ramona, Dear Sono, I need help in the worst way.” [12] when he is lying on the sofa of his rented house on 17th Street in New York.

He often hopes that he can be hospitalized for a period of time because of a certain disease. In this way, his brothers and sister will take care of him, and perhaps help him pay the medical expenses and the living expenses of his two children. In his attachment to his brothers and sister, he escapes interpersonal problems and responsibilities in real life.

Similar to the development of Herzog’s escape from one place to another, Herzog’s escape from person to person also evolves from the initial negative escape to the escape to the inner world to seek the life’s answer. The sentence at the end of the novel “At this time he had no messages for anyone. Nothing. Not a single word.” [12] and the sentence at the beginning of the novel “He looked weirdly tranquil. A radiant line went from mid-forehead over his straight nose and full, silent lips.” [12] indicate that Herzog has fled to the place of “self” and settled down.

4.3. The Escape through Creating the Spiritual World

In addition to escaping to other places and other people, Herzog also escapes from reality by creating the spiritual world. The creation of the spiritual world is mainly through memory, letter writing and self-introspection.

In the created spiritual world, Herzog imagines violence against Madeleine to vent his anger toward this marriage. He recalls his family life on Napoleon Street, reliving all kinds of human feelings experienced there in order to escape the cruel reality in life. He also writes letters to express different opinions and dissatisfaction. Although it is written on paper, it is a way to express himself and is spiritual in essence. He is “the king” of his spiritual world from which he gets much comfort.

In his self-introspection, Herzog has been asking himself what he wants to be. When pondering over the relationship with Ramona, he asks himself “Do I see myself to be after long blundering an unrecognized son of Sodom and Dionysus-an Orphic type?” [12] At the beginning, he thinks that he does nothing right. He doubts himself and denies himself. But later, with the deeper self-introspection, he becomes stronger and begins to take action. After he is informed that his little daughter Jonny is terribly treated by Madeleine and Valentine Gersbach, “he felt he must do something, something practical and useful, and must do it at once” [12]. At the end of the novel, Herzog generates “a holy feeling” [12] with great intensity, and reaches a temporary reconciliation with this world.

4.4. The Escape Through Creating the Material World

Creating the material world is also one way of Herzog’s escape, although in the book, he thinks more and does less.

This material world mainly refers to his restoration of the old house in Ludeyville. Buying a house in Ludeyville and living there with Madeleine is Herzog’s attempt to escape the ordinary life with Daisy. In the process of living in the village with Madeleine, Herzog has to spend a lot of time, efforts and money repairing the old house, which is the price he has to pay to escape from the former life.

When he comes to Ludeyville again due to injury, what he escapes is the disturbance of people and things from the outside world. He establishes a material world for himself to settle down so that he can sort his thoughts out. He repaints the piano with green varnish as a gift to Jonny. He gets his house powered up, and plans to ask Marco to come here for vacation. He even gets the house cleaned in order to welcome Ramona. Hence, creating the material world also undergoes from being negative to positive.

In conclusion, Herzog’s escapism in the first half of the novel is mostly negative, while in the later part mostly positive. Starting from resentment towards Madeleine and Valentine Gersbach, and dissatisfaction with society, others and himself, he tries to escape to other places or persons to seek comfort. During this process, Herzog begins to ask himself what he wants to be, and starts to search constantly for his own identity in this world, and through real action instead of mere fantasy, he finally obtains some inner peace.

5. Reasons for Herzog’s Escape Behavior

From the above analysis, it can be seen that Herzog’s escape from society, others and self comes from his inability to live in harmony with society, others and self. The reasons behind this “inability” are complex, but the main reasons are as follows.

5.1. Herzog’s American Jewish Identity

“As a Jewish American scholar, Herzog possesses both-cultural background, influenced by Jewish values and mainstream American cultural values” [13], which lies behind his struggles in establishing identity. As the first-generation immigrants, Herzog’s parents have undergone a hard time integrating into American society. Herzog, as one member of the second-generation immigrants, witnesses his parents’ hard times, and encounters ambivalence, struggle and confusion in the process of integration into the American society.

Alienation is also a long-term companion for him. When he is in the army, his friends regard him as a smart Jew instead of an American. Ramona thinks he is not like an American. He has been struggling for a balance between his Jewish heritage and his American life. Being such a misfit of ethnic identity in America, he concludes that “The Jews were strange to the world for a great length of time, and now the world is being strange to them in return” [12]. All these have made it difficult for him to truly integrate into American society and hence

caused his escape from society.

5.2. The Turmoil in American Society of 1960s

In *Herzog*, the turmoil state of American social development in the 1960s is exposed by the author from various aspects. Politically, individuals greedy for power are in power. Economically, the slum in the city is an essential comparative facility compared with the rich areas. In interpersonal relationships, people pay attention to realism, and judge each other by the relationship between them instead of truth and morality. Kenneth T. Walsh (2010) points out that the 1960s “was a decade of extremes, of transformational change and bizarre contrasts: flower children and assassins, idealism and alienation, rebellion and backlash” [14].

In such a society, “All higher or moral tendencies lie under suspicion of being rackets. Things we simply honor with old words, but betray or deny in our every nerves” [12]. For Herzog, who has always wanted to pursue morality and conscience, these social phenomena that violate the fundamental principles he believes in force him to escape from this society.

5.3. The Status of Intellectuals in American Society in 1960s

The 1960s witnessed great changes in American society. Intellectuals were faced with the impact of World War II, material enrichment, scientific and technological progress and spiritual chaos. During this period when politicians, economists and social activists came on stage, scholars who were purely engaged in the study of history, philosophy and other thoughts were regarded of little value. In the letter to Governor Stevenson, Herzog points out that “Like many others I thought ... intelligence at last assert itself in public affairs... But the instinct of the people was to reject mentally and its images, ideas, perhaps mistrusting them as foreign” [12]. Many intellectuals can no longer think for the sake of thought, they had to consider the problem of survival. The utilitarian tendency in realism made intellectuals who cannot produce huge material profits face an awkward position. Under such background, escapism came out.

In addition, some problems of many intellectuals themselves (such as thinking more, talking more, but doing less; holding a more critical than constructive attitude towards the problems existing in social development) make Herzog always dissatisfied with the real world and turn to the fantasy.

5.4. The Rise of Feminism in the United States in 1960s

Napikoski (2019) says that “the resurgence of feminism across the United States during the 1960s ushered in a series of changes to the status quo that continue to have an impact decades after the women’s movement” [15]. The rise of the American feminist movement in 1960s posed a great threat to

the position of patriarchy, and the position of women has been improved due to this.

In this novel, Madeleine, as a woman growing under such background, is actually a countervailing force against patriarchy. Her aggressive ambition in career, strong material desire, dissatisfaction and disobedience plague Herzog so much that he cannot deal with the relationship with her smoothly, and tries to seek comfort from his lovers to escape her.

6. Conclusion

To sum up, this paper, based on Tuan’s escapism theory, makes an analysis of the protagonist of Saul Bellow’s masterpiece *Herzog*, mainly focusing on Herzog’s escape objects, ways and reasons. Starting with the dissatisfaction with society, others and self, Herzog finally changes from negative escapism to positive escapism through physical and interpersonal space movement, and the creation of spiritual world and material world, and finally reaches a temporary reconciliation with reality.

Behind Herzog’s escapism lie various factors which integrate into a powerful force, propelling Herzog to drift from place to place, person to person, seeking his life goal to be a real man. From the whole process of his escape, it can be concluded that escapism is innate for humans. And as to whether to be positive or negative in escapism, it is a question of “to be or not to be”.

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Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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